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ABSTRACT

TREX, which stands for "translating into the mother tongue as an exercise in written language," is a classroom technique for exploring the native language by translating from a second or source language. The central feature is the individual student activity of translating, with subsequent group examination and comparison of lexical, syntactic, and stylistic differences. The approach has the advantages of using a familiar language and using the students' own products as the instructional material, but without the potential for embarrassment when totally student-written compositions are used in classroom discussion. Competence in the second language equal to that in the native language is not necessary, and since the content of the translation is predetermined, the student can concentrate on expression. Because the exercise is written, oral language habits are less likely to interfere. Texts should be representative of the native language and culture, authentic and written for native readers, coherent and complete, and without illustrations. Brief texts such as proverbs may be adequate. Teachers can comment on the texts from the native- or second-language perspective, or through linguistic comparisons. Students who would benefit from TREX include immigrants, students in a bilingual community, teacher trainees, especially future native language teachers, and college-bound students. (MSE)

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RETURN TO THE NATIVE LANGUAGE VIA "TREX"

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"There are some things about your
own village that you never know
until you have been away from it."
C.S. Lewis

TREX is short for 'translating into the mother tongue as an exercise in written language'.[1]

TREX is thus not primarily intended for testing the comprehension of the source language (SL), but seen as an opportunity for the students to actively explore their mother tongue, in this case the target language (TL).

The most essential part of TREX is the translation as activity, each student writing his own version.

After this individual training, a common session is a natural sequel. The various individual translations, as products, will necessarily differ in several respects, lexical, syntactic, as well as stylistic, and will accordingly afford a rich material for linguistic discussions and observations. If the teacher's comments are exclusive ad hoc, the possibilities of TREX are not realized, but a careful planning of the follow-up could certainly warrant a useful connection and integration with other lessons in the mother tongue.

Furthermore, the material produced by the students themselves is not perceived by them as something unfamiliar and irrelevant, which may be the case when the teacher presents an authentic or contrived text of his own choice to be analysed linguistically.

On the other hand, a translated text is not too personal. Critical comments on a composition or on some other text of the student's own invention may be embarrassing and humiliating, even if the student realizes that he is learning a great deal from a reasoned criticism. It is no secret how difficult it is to persuade a class to write anyhow, and quite a few teachers refrain from correcting and discussing the language of the reluctant writers, convinced that any criticism would deter the weak achievers from further writing.

[1] This paper is only concerned with written translation, not with oral interpretation.

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TREX, however, facilitates an objectifying of the text: you can regard a text of your own production without excessive personal involvement. A translation that turns out badly will not be seen as a personal failure to the same extent as an unsuccessful composition.

In many respects, translating approaches the concept of a purely linguistic activity.

Once the SL-text is understood, the student will not loose time in desperately asking himself what on earth he is going to write. The content is already given in the original text, which is a firm starting-point with a set of instructions, as it were. How to write, not what to write, is the central preoccupation of the translator.

It should be emphasized that the occasional or professional translator's work is creative. He has to produce a new text in the TL. It is not an imitative procedure, a more or less skilful copying, as a popular misconception will have it.

C.G. Bjurström, a renowned professional translator, has pointed out this fact in a paper about 'The Translator's Work' (Sw. 'Översättarens arbete'): what is to be reproduced is not the SL-text - an impossible feat - but the original author's course of action, his type of workmanship, his toil at language; and the work to be done by the translator is done within the TL - not somewhere between the languages (Bjurström 1978).

To use my metaphor, the translator returns to the TL with a set of SL directives, and it is only now that his proper work is taking place. If the TL is his mother tongue, he will become aware of it in quite a new manner, the all-too-familiar and taken-for-granted is seen in a new light.

Hence it is evident that he must feel at home in the TL for the translation to be accomplished and for an exercise like TREX to be meaningful. A fair mastery of the TL is crucial. Ideally, it is the translator's mother tongue.[2]

An equal competence in the SL is not necessary. Rather, other components of the linguistic competence are required: a reader's conscientious decoding and reflective interpretation.[3]

Undoubtedly, the capability of idiomatic writing in the SL deepens the critical reader's appreciation of the SL-text. He knows more about the

[2] Here, practicing translators and translation theorists agree. F. Güttinger, e.g., has a paragraph, entitled "Vorrang der Muttersprache" (Güttinger 1963).

[3] About the reader's competence, see Borgstam 1978.

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reasons why a SL-author has preferred a certain expression, for instance, but that will not necessarily make him a better translator. Understanding what is written is of course the important question. Above all, you must know the SL well enough to realize when you have not understood, as Gunnel Vallquist (1978) has observed.

The corollary is clear: to ask a student to translate into a foreign, largely unknown language is an unreasonable demand, which can only make the beginner frustrated or over-confident. He has no intuitive criteria of adequacy, and a good translation may be a chance performance or an imitation of already existing versions. It is no wonder that translation in the classroom is regarded with suspicion by foreign language teachers.[4]

More surprising is the fact that TREX has been completely disregarded by the mother tongue teachers. At most, learning from translating has been noticed as a negligible spin-off from lessons in other languages and in any case regarded as the concern of the SL-teachers.[5]

As was stated above, the TREX-student can concentrate on the expression, since the content is determined by the SL-text, a fact that has obvious psychologic and pedagogic advantages.

There are linguistic advantages as well. The constraints of the SL-text make themselves constantly reminded, confronting the student with obstacles within the TL which he has to tackle. He has to make, his own way, and in doing so he will discover resources in his own language that he would otherwise not have thought of as being available for his own use.

We all use certain 'communicative strategies' in talking and writing: avoidance, approximation, and so on.[6] TREX, however, implies a challenge to try new tactics and strategies. The translator may have to decide for previously halfunderstood words, and in order to use them he has to reflect on denotation and connotation, possible collocations, and possible contexts,

[4] About the use and misuse of translation in foreign language teaching, see Palmer 1968.

[5] There may have been exceptions in the former Swedish school system, abolished 1968. A Latin teacher could be a Swedish teacher as well. Translations into Swedish from Latin were considered the most important exam papers next to Swedish composition. The translation was of course used as a comprehension control, and considered as pertaining to the subject of Latin. It was required, however, that a translation should not only be correct, but written in 'good' idiomatic Swedish. Otherwise, the highest mark (for Latin!) was not given.

[6] About communicative strategies, see Palmberg 1978.

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and so on.[7] His active vocabulary is enlarged as well as enriched. Nor can he avoid syntactic constructions otherwise felt to be difficult or too complicated.

The traditional mother tongue lessons are generally more suited for testing previously acquired knowledge and habitual stratagems than for teaching something new, at least as far as writing is concerned. Writing a composition, for instance, and encouraged by the teacher to express himself 'in his own words', the student will certainly do so, even if his customary vocabulary is far from adequate. Writing a summary of a book or an article, the student is tempted to imitate the phraseology of the author, a communicative strategy that might be described as linguistic hitch-hiking.

The transition from largely unreflective speech to consciously planned writing is not easy. In speech, fluency is more important than adequacy, at least in face-to-face interaction, while various functions of the written language demand the very opposite attitude.[8]

In order to teach how to read and write, the notion of defining a text as 'speech written down' may serve as the pedagogic trick. But this notion has to be discarded once the alphabetical skills are acquired. Otherwise the student will transfer his speech strategies to writing.

In translating, you turn from reading one text to producing another text, and the oral language habits are less likely to interfere.

The translator cannot use language automatically, cannot see it as a mere instrument. It is true that some passages are routine matters, but sooner or later the unpredictability of language use and its countless expedients force him to focus on the TL as material with certain inherent qualities, something that can be shaped and reshaped, within certain boundaries; not material that can be treated anyhow to yield anything but inexhaustible material which can be managed and mastered.

For the TREX-student the rules of grammar are disclosed in his own work. That his native language has a grammar may surprise him, and so does, of course, the mysterious fact that he knows how to handle this grammar. He

[7] I do not mean that the students have to learn these very terms. The current mothertongue textbooks abound with linguistic terms which the students are learning without really knowing the phenomena referred to by these terms. By TREX they would learn from experience, with or without a linguistic nomenclature.

[8] A detailed discussion of these important questions is found in Crystal 1976.

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becomes aware of his own linguistic competence.[9]

The necessity of stylistic studies is also discovered. For a translator stylistics cannot remain a supposed inventory of superficial niceties and frills.

In short, I think that TREX will help the students to see the point of metalinguistic considerations. All language teachers have to fight the false dichotomy between form and content and the wide-spread tendency to regard form as unimportant. The students are sure to be persuaded by their own experience more than by the teacher's rhetoric.

The experience with TREX is convincing. For those who have struggled with translating, the concluding remarks in Epstein's Language and Style do not seem a paradox but a true description of linguistic facts: "In the long run, the what is created by the how ... and if the how falters, the what disintegrates" (Epstein 1978).

It may be added that the efficient how of a specific what depends on the what for, the function and the purpose of the text. This intricate interdependence between content, form, and function is open for the translator's inspection to quite an exceptional degree. The experience of returning to the native language is unique. TREX can thus integrate the different activities within the teaching of the mother tongue, grammatical analysis and writing, for instance. It can also be a means to integrate the teaching of the TL and the SL. A close co-operation between the respective teachers is in any case necessary, especially for the selection of SL-texts to be used.

These ought to be

(1) representative for the SL and its culture;
(2) authentic, written for the native readers of the SL;
(3) coherent and complete, not fragmentary; and
(4) without illustrations.

In short, the text should be a text, nothing more and nothing less.

On the other hand, TREX need not be an overly ambitious enterprise. A proverb, for instance, is a kind of minimal text that answers the requirements (1) to (4).[10]

It is important that the TREX proper should be made individually, in a silent and unhurried atmosphere.[11] Each student needs his own undisturbed

[9] Cf. Lewis 1976:311-312.

[10] Generally known, already translated proverbs, or proverbs with traditional equivalent sayings in the TL should of course be avoided.

[11] What I have in mind is the silent concentration during the Latin examinations, referred to in footnote 5, but without the stress of a test-situation.

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training, setting his own pace, making his own linguistic experiments and experience. Consultations among the students - perhaps on the pretext 'team-work' - are thus not recommendable. The common discussion has to be deferred to the follow-up.

Meagre word-lists are definitely out of place. Instead, comprehensive dictionaries should be available, especially monolingual TL-dictionaries giving synonyms and definitions.

The teacher-guided follow-up can of course be organized in many different ways. A tripartite lesson - or a set of three lessons - seems, however, to suggest itself:

(1) comments on the SL-text from the SL point of view, including corrections of obvious errors due to misinterpretation of the SL-text;

(2) comments on the produced TL-texts from the TL point of view, as outlined and emphasized in this paper;

(3) a comparison between the SL-text and the translations, in other words applied contrastive linguistics. An authentic SL-text and the translations made by the students themselves constitute, I think, a particularly good basis for contrastive discourse analysis and for a communicative approach to language and language teaching.[12]

The distinctive possibilities of TREX make this training and teaching device especially useful for the following categories of students:

(1) immigrant children (and adults); their home language is chosen as TL, and the language of the new country as SL, in order to further a productive writing in the mother tongue and a better understanding of the new language;

(2) students living in a bilingual community, such as Finland;

(3) students at teacher training colleges, particularly future mother tongue teachers;

(4) future university students, that is, students in upper secondary schools, and many other categories of persons who are formally admitted to academic education.

It is a growing concern of Swedish university teachers that too many students are slow and inefficacious readers of English textbooks. Evidently, they have had too little training in close and reflective reading. Swedish textbooks present linguistic difficulties for the same reason.

A greater problem than reading Swedish is, however, the writing of academic papers in Swedish. The present state of the art of writing clear,

[12] For a discussion of applied contrastive linguistics and the communicative approach, which is too often missing in the schools, see Sajavaara 1977.

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coherent, and efficient Swedish prose is far from satisfactory, as recent reports have shown.[13]

This is a serious matter. To be able to understand English textbooks and to know how to write understandable Swedish are quite obviously two essential requirements for higher education.

In this connection, TREX could be a particularly valuable help. Taking English as the SL and Swedish as the TL, the most urgently needed training is afforded: reading English and writing Swedish is combined in a natural way.[14]

[13] See Nordberg 1979, who emphasizes the lack of <u>training</u>.

[14] It is only fair to underline that TREX takes time, as any kind of training. A short supplementary course would not do the tricks of TREX:

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